

15 June 2014

7 Habits for Christians - 1

“7 Habits for Christians - 1: Character, Not Techniques”

I'm going to do something I've never done before: preach a sermon series on what to do, on how to live. In many churches this is normal. In some churches preachers tell people how to live all the time. When someone says, “Don't preach a sermon to me,” they mean, “Don't tell me what to do.” There are two reasons I don't usually do this. One is that it seems kind of arrogant to me. Who am I to tell you what to do? In some places, in some cultures that might be appropriate. But in America? Among the educated middle class? Not sure that's what's most needed.

The other and more important reason I don't usually do this is because I don't think that's the chief purpose of preaching. For Lutherans and many others, the chief purpose of preaching is to proclaim the liberating power of the Gospel of forgiveness through the cross of Jesus. To proclaim the love of God and invite people to live in that love and live out that love in their lives. And yes, there are practical, everyday applications of that proclamation. But preachers like me trust that God working through the Holy Spirit will work that out in better and more appropriate ways than what we come up with.

However, I'm going to give this topical preaching a shot this summer and see how it works out. I'm calling this series, “Seven Habits for Christians,” and I'm basing it on Stephen Covey's *7 Habits of Highly Effective People*. It's not a new book, but it's a good book that stands the test of time. Covey is a Christian, and his book is spiritually based, something that becomes clear if you listen to the audio CDS. It's aimed at business people, but he spends as much or more time talking about family and inter-personal relationships as he does about business ones..

His book is not a techniques for success book; it's a book about how to be the best person you can be. It's a book about principles and character, not techniques for getting what you want. I think that what he says applies to church life just as well as it applies to personal life. Now, I thought about doing this sermon series some time ago. But by happy coincidence, or happy God-icidence as some would have it, we have a Mutual Ministry Review committee in Church Council that is focused on coming up with a plan to grow this congregation. And I kinda think that working on being the best we can possibly be would be a pretty good run-up to whatever their plan turns out to be.

So, Habit #1: be Proactive. I'm going to start with some heavy theology. It comes in two parts. Ready? Part 1: You are not God. You did not create yourself. You cannot will or speak things into being like God did in Genesis. I once read a piece on famous last words. My favorite is, “I am not going to die.” And then the speaker of those words died. You are not God.

But here's part 2: You are a co-creator with God. The Psalm says, “What is mankind that you are mindful of him. You have made him but little lower than the angels.” In Genesis, unlike everything else that has been created, God says, “Let us make mankind in *our* image.’ So God created them, male and female he created them.” Well, there it is: we are created, not self-made.

But we are created in God's image, created to have a relationship with God, created to mirror God in some way.

Covey doesn't mention any of this, but that's the theology behind habit #1: Be Proactive. What he does say is, "We are not our feelings. We are not our moods. We are not even our thoughts. The very fact that we can think about these things separates us from them." The point he is getting to is that we have choice. We can be reactive, prisoners to our circumstances, helpless in the face of what others or we ourselves think, what others do, what happens to us, how we feel. Or we can be proactive; we can choose how to respond to what we think, how we feel, what happens to us.

There are limits. We can't control what others do. We can't control events. We can't even control our own feelings. But we can influence all of them. Our limits are less than what we might think. I'll get into what this looks like next week.

But for now, let me just say this. Churches in North America today can react to what is happening to them or they can be proactive. They can complain about Sunday morning soccer games or about how the younger generations aren't like they are (as if that should be a surprise) or about a thousand other things beyond their control. Or they can be proactive over the things they do control.

We are created co-creators, little lower than the angels. God seems to have a high opinion of our status and abilities. And God has made us to be proactive.